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At the Forks of the Delaware 1794-1811

CHRONICLES OF EARLY TRAVEL TO EASTON
AND NEIGHBORING PARTS OF PENNSYLVANIA
AND NEW JERSEY, INCLUDING EXTRACTS
FROM A HITHERTO UNTRANSLATED AND
UNPUBLISHED MANUSCRIPT.

BY

RAYNER WICKERSHAM KELSEY, PH.D.

PROFESSOR OF AMERICAN HISTORY IN HAVERFORD COLLEGE

A PAPER READ AT EASTON, PENNSYLVANIA, NOVEMBER 13, 1919,
BEFORE THE NORTHAMPTON COUNTY HISTORICAL
AND GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY

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INSCRIBED TO
MY ESTEEMED FRIEND
FLOYD S. BIXLER

PREFACE

It may seem out of proportion in so brief a pamphlet to provide such full paraphernalia of preface, table of contents, foot-notes, and index. Indeed note 2 is a miniature bibliography.

All this is done for the sake of consistency. Having bewailed the lack of such accessories in other pamphlets the writer dared not omit them in his own. A table of contents enables the reader at a glance to see in their proper sequence the general topics of a study. An index gives instant reference to names of people and places and to all lesser details. How wearily has many a research student waded through long pages of material to discover the presence or absence of something on his topic. Hours of time could have been saved if there had been an index or even a good table of contents. Similarly are the foot-notes and bibliography suited often to save the later scholar long excursions into blind alleys.

So the present writer has felt compelled to practice his own precepts. Perhaps the smallness of the pamphlet may make the lesson of the accessories more outstanding.

A word about the body of the text. The Caze-nove material has never been published before.

The Taylor *Journal* was printed only recently, and in a magazine to which few people have access. The Rochefoucauld items are from a century-old edition of his travels, to be found only in the larger city and historical libraries. (See page 2, note.)

It seemed worth while to bring this somewhat important material together into available and permanent form.

R. W. K.

HAVERFORD COLLEGE,
May, 1920

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AT THE FORKS OF THE DELAWARE

1794-1811

It is a happy fact for the people of Easton and vicinity that, in the early days, their city was located on one of the principal highways between the east and the west, indeed on the route most used by emigrants from New England to the new lands of Ohio and Kentucky. So it was that many travelers passed through their city and left accounts of its life and appearance at various times.

Three such accounts, that come from the period 1794-1811, have been selected in the present instance as giving a fairly clear picture of town and country in that day.¹ It was the period between the founding of the new government, under the Constitution (in 1789) and the outbreak of the War of 1812. In spite of many difficulties within and without America, it was on the whole a period of prosperity and growth for the new country under its new government.

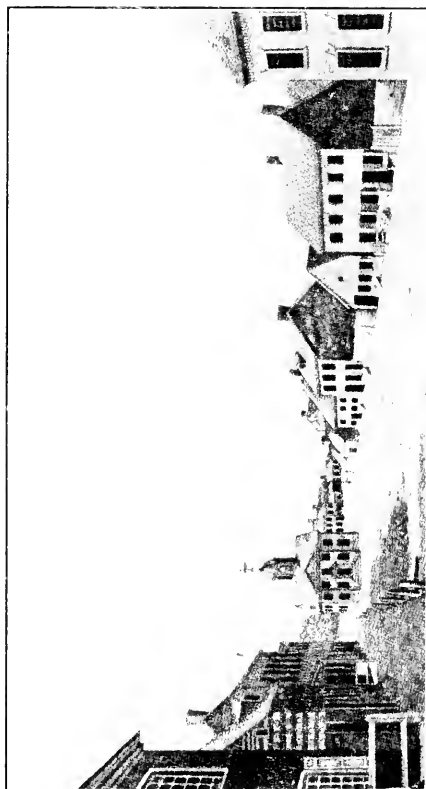
In 1794 Theophile Cazenove, a Dutchman, of Swiss-French descent, passed through Easton going westward from New York. He was the first

¹ For early views of Easton, between the Revolution and 1830, see U. W. Condit, *History of Easton* (1885); W. J. Heller, *Historic Easton* (1911); Eschenbach and Weaver, *Forks of the Delaware* (1900).

General Agent of the Holland Land Company in America and was en route to inspect lands in central Pennsylvania. The second traveler was the duc de Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, a French aristocrat, seeking asylum in America, as did many of his fellows, from the excesses of the French Revolution. He passed through Easton, on his way from Philadelphia to New York, in 1797. Fourteen years later, in 1811, a Rhode Island Quaker, Rowse Taylor, enjoyed the hospitality of the city as he journeyed with his family to their new home in eastern Ohio. From the journals of these three travelers, the following account is compiled.²

The approach to Easton, from east or west, in that early day was of course by wagon road. From New York the traveler came wearily over a road, hilly and stony for the most part, and well nigh impassable in rainy weather. The Morris Canal and the railroads still belonged to the distant future. Except in the larger towns one must needs lodge often at lonely farmhouses on the roadside, whose proprietors earned an extra penny by entertaining wayfarers in quest of shelter for the night.

² The Journal of Theophile Cazenove is in manuscript form in the Library of Congress. It has been translated into English by the present writer and will soon be published. There are several editions of the *Travels* of Rochefoucauld-Liancourt. The one used in the present instance is the English edition of two volumes published in London, 1799. The *Journal* of Rowse Taylor was discovered recently by the present writer in Providence, Rhode Island, and was printed in the *Bulletin of the Friends' Historical Society* (Phila.), vol. VIII, No. 3, and vol. IX, No. 1 (1918-1919).



EASTON IN 1800

The western part of New Jersey was in a very undeveloped condition a hundred years ago, and it suffered by comparison with its sister state across the Delaware. Rowse Taylor wrote: "The Jersey horses are much more to be admired than Jersey women; indeed we saw little in that state worthy of admiration; the land in general is indifferent, and stony; the fences are very bad; the houses, even those that are otherwise elegant, are built only one story and a half high; most of them have several little awkward additions."

Cazenove, also, complained of the houses and the women: "The lack of neatness and of furniture in the farmhouses, the lack of gardens and improvements . . . comes from the lack of taste and sensibility on the part of the farmers. The wives have the care of the house, and besides they have a number of children, 5, 6, 7, 8. So they have more work than they can do, with no help, except one or two old and dispirited colored women. That is why the wives are indifferent, tired. With the impossibility of having a neat or comfortable home, and the lack of seeing anything neat and comfortable, it is plain how, from father to son, is passed on this astounding indifference to the comforts of life. Fortunately, vanity plays its part and obliges the farmers' wives to be well dressed, often above their condition, on Sunday at church. Without the wise institution of a day of rest, and church service, may

be the farmers' wives would never wash. This lack of home comfort obliges the farmer, who wants to enjoy himself, to go to the neighboring saloons to talk about politics and to drink heavily; so having no opportunity to use their extra money in improvements, they buy more land around, and the pride of being considered a large land-owner is the only thing that rouses them; except for a few inland inhabitants, who have lived for a long time, from father to son, on their farms (but those of that kind live in or very near the cities) most of them have, either themselves or their fathers, come to America from Germany, Scotland, and especially Ireland, poor, from among the poorest country-people, and spent their first years in servitude (as is the custom for that class) from 2 to 6 years, and then become mechanics or farmers, and brought up their children as they were brought up."

But enough of the bad roads, the ugly houses, the drinking men and the overworked women of early Jersey! Let us follow our Quaker emigrant as he ends his wilderness journey and enters the land of promise: "On our arrival at the Delaware we found a covered bridge over it 600 feet in length, its breadth ample, admitting of 2 carriage roads and sufficient room for passengers on foot; when on the midst of it one might fancy himself in an immense store."

Both Taylor and Cazenove remarked with emphasis upon the beauty of primitive Easton. Taylor wrote: "On entering Easton, a pretty town on the west bank of the Delaware, the first thing that arrested our attention was the large horses,—ours looked like colts. Here all appeared civility, and politeness; we found at the Hotel (a large elegant brick building) excellent accommodations; the landlord, a well-bred man, was very attentive."

Cazenove, the earliest traveler of the three, also called the town "pretty," and spoke of the fine arrangement of the main square and the rows of streets, "partly lined with good houses of blue stone, abundant in the neighborhood."

Cazenove was more definite on the hotel question. He wrote: "Stopped at Opp's,³ at the sign of the Golden Swan, very good lodging." It may be remarked here that this traveler was a man of distinctive tastes. On the greater part of this journey he traveled with a coach and four, a valet, a coachman, and postilion. He also had an extra saddle horse along for a change when he became weary of his coach. He always chose the best hotels and was a critical judge of the service rendered. So we may judge that Opp's Golden Swan Hotel was a credit to Easton in its day.

At this stage of his journey Cazenove's party reckoned three men and three horses, and Mr. Opp

³ Undoubtedly the reference is to Jacob Opp, who kept a hotel in Easton at that time.

charged him about \$3.90 for the night's lodging, no doubt including supper and breakfast. Jacob Opp was no profiteer.

Cazenove's *Journal* is a running account of men and industries in the thriving town of 1794. The church is large, he says, and the Lutheran and Presbyterian services are alternately preached, but both in German. There is also a large courthouse, and a vaulted brick building in which the county records are kept. The prison is not so good, for the traveler notes that the construction of it is such as to account for the frequent escapes of prisoners.

The remainder of Cazenove's observations cannot be told better than in his own words: "Mr. G. Craig⁴ who is its prothonotary is a handsome man, and Mrs. Craig gives an opportunity to notice that city society people, who are isolated in a little country-town, are the same in every country. She received me for tea elegantly dressed and she complained without ceasing of being deprived of the pleasures of Philadelphia.

"Mr. [Samuel] Sitgreaves, who lives here, has just been nominated for Congress for this district, Northampton, Bucks, and Cumberland counties. He is a clever and very eloquent lawyer; his federalist principles kept him away from any post until now, but since each district must elect a repre-

⁴ It is possible that Cazenove got the first initial of this name wrong. According to Ellis, *History of Northampton County*, p. 277, William Craig was prothonotary from 1788 to 1795.

sentative to Congress, and there was no other to do credit to the county, Mifflin's party backed him for this election.

"There is here a printing establishment of only one form, and which prints only a German newspaper that is published every Wednesday; the subscribers pay a dollar a year, and 600 copies are delivered in the city and neighborhood. The printer is at the same time printer, poet, and compositor.

"In one of the stores there were many books well bound. They were all Bibles, Psalms and Chris Copp's [J. B. Koppe's?] sermons, printed in Germany, and which sell very well here and in the vicinity, where the people are very religious.

"The facilities for shipping provisions from here to Philadelphia, by the Delaware river, bring here the produce of the neighborhood, especially in winter, when there is snow; and some merchants (Mr. Piersol) pay the farmers for the grain they bring, according to the price in Philadelphia, only 6 cents less for a bushel. At the present time they pay 11 s. for a bushel of wheat and 60 s., or 8 dollars, for a barrel of 180 lbs. of flour.

"The freight from Easton to Philadelphia is 6 cents per bushel, and $\frac{1}{4}$ dollar for a barrel of flour, and the boats make the trip in from 24 to 30 hours. To go up the river takes 3 days and the 100 lb. weight costs $\frac{1}{2}$ a dollar, which is as expensive as the price of the stage from Philadelphia to Easton.

“There are several locations advantageous for mills; in a radius of 2 miles there are 7 flour mills, each one working with 3 pairs of millstones.

“Mordecai Piersol, merchant and real estate agent, knows the neighborhood. He also is a commission merchant in grain, asking $\frac{1}{2}\%$. One must send $\frac{1}{2}$ in small notes of the 3 banks and $\frac{1}{2}$ coin. In December, middle of January and February, the best buying time—when there is a great deal of snow—is able to supply at least 10,000 bushels and store them until spring,—April or March, to go down the river. The storage, shipping, and freight to Philadelphia amount to 9 pence per bushel.”

Such was the life of Easton as seen by Theophile Cazenove in 1794. Three years later the duc de Rochefoucauld-Liancourt added his observations along similar lines. According to his journal town lots with a twenty foot frontage, and 200 feet deep, sold for \$240 to \$500, according to location. Farm lands in the vicinity ranged from \$25 to \$100 per acre, and there were many fine orchards.⁵

Laborers received from 50 to 65 cents per day; masons and carpenters \$1.25 in the town. Meat was five cents per pound and board three dollars per week. Those were truly not the days of the high cost of living.

⁵ Cazenove says farm land in the vicinity brought from \$26 to \$40 per acre, in 1794.

Rochefoucauld also emphasizes the milling business and the trade with Philadelphia. According to his count there were eleven good mills within seven miles of Easton, and 35,000 barrels of flour were shipped annually to Philadelphia.

From Rochefoucauld and from other sources we know that Easton was at that time the market place for great sections of eastern Pennsylvania and western Jersey.⁶ Here grain was brought to be ground and shipped. Here the manufactured goods of America and Europe were brought on Durham boats, poled up the Delaware from Philadelphia. So the sturdy farmers sold their grain to Mordecai Piersol or others of his trade, and bought with the proceeds such tools, clothing or trinkets as met their needs or fancies.

Easton, although a busy town, was yet small in those days. The United States Census of 1790 gives it a population of 692 white people, with eleven free negroes and five slaves. Rochefoucauld, seven years later, says there were 150 houses, mostly of stone.

Yet what Easton lacked in size it made up in business activity and the good quality of its citizens. Rowse Taylor says: "We had occasion to call on a Black-smith, a saddler, a Tinman, and the Postmaster, all of whom showed good breeding: I called at the Bank, *even there* I was treated with civility."

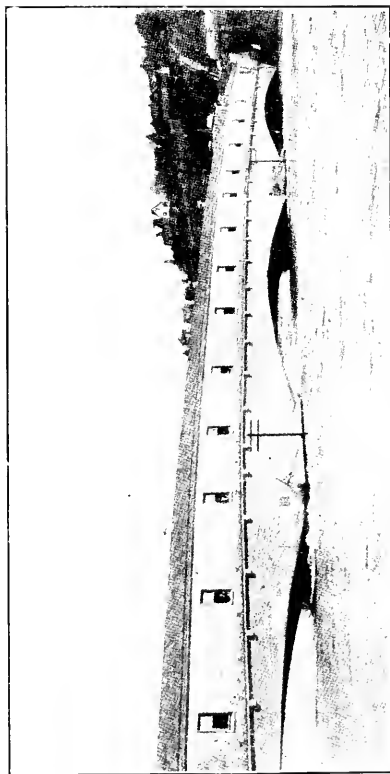
⁶ See Condit, *History of Easton*, p. 158.

A further glimpse of the country surrounding Easton may be allowed us in departing, as in the case of our early travelers. Bethlehem and Nazareth we must not enter for lack of time because almost every early journal has entries of unusual length on those interesting places.

According to Cazenove there was great difficulty in finding water on the road from Easton to Nazareth, and the farmers had to dig deeply and search for a long time. Rochefoucauld says: "The road from Bethlehem to Nazareth, and from Nazareth to Easton, is a succession of little hills and valleys more or less extensive. Many situations on this road afford very agreeable prospects. The houses are numerous, and have the air of comfort."

This day's journey for us may be closed as was Rochefoucauld's when he said farewell to Easton more than a century ago. It will be worth while to follow him for a few miles because he took a direction rather unusual in that day and can give us a glimpse of things usually withheld from modern eyes.

"The river Delaware is, throughout, the boundary between the state of Pennsylvania and that of New Jersey. It is narrow at Easton, and they are now collecting wood to erect a bridge over it, the abutments of which on each side are already built: until it be finished, the river is crossed in a very good ferry-boat. Being desirous of viewing the



THE OLD DELAWARE RIVER BRIDGE AT EASTON

banks of this river, I went so far out of my road to follow them. The road to Belvidere, which I took, is all along through the Scotch Mountains, and the little hills, which in this tract almost uniformly border the river, amidst an agreeable succession of large vallies, from three to six or seven miles in extent. The country is filled with well built houses pretty close together. The lands are of a good quality, and in a state of high cultivation; even some of the declivities of the mountains are cleared, and are very productive. The whole of this road presents a succession of prospects, not extensive, but rich and agreeable. In three or four places we lose entirely the little hills which border the Delaware, and enjoy a view towards Philadelphia, through vallies much more extensive, still better cultivated and inhabited than those of Jersey, and which is terminated by the Blue Mountains. These prospects are rich, varied, and delightful. The creek, which empties itself into the Delaware at Belvidere, is the only water to be found in the tract from Easton, which is more than fourteen miles, and the corn of all that district is carried to the Easton mills. This creek, which has a course of thirty miles, is at Belvidere broad and rapid. Two successive falls, of from fifteen to twenty feet each, turn corn⁷ and saw-mills.

⁷ Throughout Rochefoucauld's account the word corn is used in the English sense of "grain," and undoubtedly refers to wheat and rye, chiefly the former.

“The corn-mills send their flour to Philadelphia, and are supplied with grain in the neighborhood, where it is produced in great quantities. This traffic is carried on by the Delaware; but the navigation of that river, although it is open for an hundred and fifty miles higher, is rendered difficult and dangerous, from the very strong currents, and the number of rocks in several parts of it. There are two or three of these rapids between Belvidere and Easton, two of them two miles from Belvidere, called the Little and Great Falls: at the latter, in three quarters of a mile of its course, the river has a fall of twenty-nine feet. The navigable canal is near the shore of Pennsylvania, and is not above six fathoms broad. Beyond that the river is full of rocks, a very little depth under water, and sometimes appearing above its surface. I was informed, that notwithstanding the rapidity of this current, which carries vessels at the rate of a mile in two minutes, and the number of rocks in its course, the boats are in no danger when the boatmen are attentive; but it often happens that they are not so, but get drunk, which produces frequent accidents; for if the boat be allowed to go the least to one side, and be not kept carefully in the stream, it is inevitably driven either against the rocks or the bank. The rising and falling of the waters increases the danger; and besides this, the ice uni-

formly stops the navigation during the winter: it is often impracticable in the spring, and even to the middle of summer. The navigation from Belvidere to Philadelphia is made in twenty-four hours, and it takes five or six days to go up the river from Philadelphia to Belvidere. Hence a hundred-weight, which costs only the fifth of a dollar to be carried to Philadelphia, costs three quarter dollars to be sent to Belvidere. The same applies to the whole navigation of the Delaware, with the difference of the freight, according to their distance. The batteaux, which come down from Belvidere, carry seventy barrels of flour. By these the stores at Belvidere are supplied with dry goods and liquors from Philadelphia, with which they, in their turn, supply that part of the country which furnishes the corn to the mills. The price of goods at Belvidere is about thirty per cent. higher than at Philadelphia. There are at present two stores at Belvidere, which are said to be in a prosperous situation.

“Belvidere consists of about twenty houses, but the number of inhabitants is annually increasing, and the neighborhood is very populous. It is one of the pleasantest situations which I have hitherto seen in America. The view is not very extensive, but it embraces a great number of gentle elevations on both sides of the river, and is filled with houses. It follows the Delaware for two miles and to the

head of the Great Falls, and is bounded, at the distance of three or four miles, by the chain of the Scotch mountains, along the side of which the road runs towards Easton. The lands in the neighborhood of Belvidere are sold at from forty to forty-eight dollars the acre. The town-lots, which are a quarter of an acre, bring at present from a hundred to a hundred and twenty-five dollars. The lands some miles farther are sold for from thirty to thirty-five dollars the acre, and those in Pennsylvania at the same distance are always three or four dollars dearer, although not of better quality than those in Jersey. This proceeds from the superior excellence of the Pennsylvania laws, the more flourishing state of the finances, which requires less taxes than in Jersey for the expenses of government; and, finally, from the dependence of that part of the state of Jersey upon Philadelphia for its sales and returns.

“These motives, however, do not appear sufficient to occasion so great a difference of price between lands of the same quality, and in the same situation. This difference however does exist, and the Pennsylvania side is by far the more populous.”

With this statement of the preeminence of the Keystone State we may bid farewell to the three wise men of a hundred years ago, who journeyed from a far country to the Forks of the Delaware,

and painted for us a picture of town and country in that day, and of our stalwart forebears who laid so well the foundations of our present prosperity and happiness.

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